

Our strategy is working. Last year we obtained commitments to reduce future pollution by an estimated 1 billion pounds, an increase of 50 percent over the 2001 level. And I want to thank all the EPA employees who work in the field to work on this collaborative effort.

As Steve leads the EPA, he will maintain our commonsense approach of collaborating with leaders and volunteers at the local level to find the best solutions to meet our national goals. We'll continue to vigorously enforce our environmental laws. We'll encourage good stewardship of natural resources, and we will focus on results. We'll continue to protect the health of our citizens and help guarantee the quality of our air, water, and land for generations to come.

I'm looking forward to working with this good man as he leads this important Agency. Steve, congratulations. God bless.

[At this point, Administrator Johnson made brief remarks.]

The President. Congratulations.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:48 p.m. in the Rachel Carson Room at the Environmental Protection Agency's Ariel Rios Building. In his remarks, he referred to Administrator Johnson's wife, Deborah Johnson, and his father, William Johnson. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Administrator Johnson.

Remarks in a Discussion on Strengthening Social Security in Greece, New York

May 24, 2005

The President. Thank you all. Go ahead and be seated. Be seated, thank you. We've got to get to work. Thank you all for coming. Please be seated. Thanks for coming. Thanks for the warm welcome, and thanks for caring about the future of our country, because that's what we're here to discuss. Before I get to the Social Security issue, I do want to thank some people.

First I want to thank the Greece Athena Middle and High Schools for letting us use this fantastic facility. It really is beautiful, yes. A fantastic place, isn't it? Yes. I want to thank

Helen Wahl and Dick Snyder. Helen is the principal of the high school; Dick Snyder is the principal of the middle school. I want to thank all the teachers. I want to thank the superintendent. I want to thank all the folks who care a lot about making sure the kids get educated here in this part of the world.

I'm sorry Laura is not here. Yes, you'd probably rather have her here than me, wouldn't you? Anyway—[laughter].

Audience member. We didn't say that.

The President. Well, no, but you thought it. You didn't say it, but I could tell you thought it. You're not the only person here who feels that way, I want you to know. She's doing great. She is on a trip promoting the freedom agenda. She's made it very clear to people in the Middle East, you can't have a complete society unless women participate fully in the society in the Middle East. I'm really proud of her. I'm a fortunate man that she said yes when I asked her to marry me back in Midland, Texas. She's a great First Lady. I'm looking forward to having her come home tonight, back to the White House.

I thank Congressman Tom Reynolds. He's an effective United States Congressman who cares a lot about this district. I'm proud to call him friend. I'm proud to call Congressman Sherry Boehlert friend as well. Sherry is from the district next door; I've known him for a long time. He's a good, thoughtful man. He's a fine United States Congressman. Congressman Jim Walsh is with us today. He too is a fine United States Congressman. And I was proud to be traveling with Congressman Randy Kuhl. He's a freshman Member of the House of Representatives, doing a great job. Thank you all for coming.

They wanted to ride on Air Force One. [Laughter] Proud to make room for them. They want to ride back on Air Force One. [Laughter] And they probably want a meal on Air Force One. Save up your appetite, fellows, you got a good meal coming.

I want to thank all the State and local officials who have joined us today. I'm proud you're here.

There's two athletes in the audience I want to pay recognition to. First of all, a person you all know well, really a fine member of the community, member of the NFL Hall

of Fame, Jim Kelly. Thank you for coming. Good to see you again, Jim. And at the other age of the—at the other end of the age spectrum is a fine athlete from this part of the world. I just met her. As you know, I'm a baseball person. I love baseball. The fact that somebody would pitch a perfect game at any level of baseball is amazing. The fact that a person would pitch a perfect game and strike out every batter is even more amazing. So welcome a fantastic pitcher in the—representing the Dodgers baseball team, from Little League Baseball, Katie Brownell. Thanks for coming.

And finally, one other person, before I get to the topic at hand, I'd like to introduce, is a woman named George-Ann Schaufelle. George-Ann is a volunteer. And the reason I bring up people who volunteer is I want to remind you that the true strength of this country lies in the hearts and souls of our citizens, that if you want to be a participant in America and in the future America, volunteer to make somebody's life better. Feed the hungry; help find shelter for the homeless. George-Ann is involved with the Literacy Volunteers of Rochester program, helping somebody learn to read. I can't think of a better way to pass on a gift from one generation to the next than to mentor somebody, particularly somebody who needs to learn to read.

My point is this: Serve your community and serve your country by taking time out of your busy lives to volunteer to make somebody's life better, to answer that universal call to love a neighbor just like you'd like to be loved yourself. I don't know where George-Ann is. Where are you, George-Ann? Thanks for coming. Thanks for being a great role model.

We got a lot to do in Washington, DC. One of the big issues, of course, is Social Security—although yesterday there was some progress made. I'm pleased that the Senate is moving forward on my judicial nominees who were previously being blocked. These nominees have been waiting years for an up-or-down vote on the Senate floor, and now they'll get one. It's about time we're making some progress.

It's important for this Nation to address issues. I believe the job of the President is

to confront problems, not to pass them on to future Presidents or future generations. I believe my job in representing everyone who lives in this country is that when I see a problem, is to say to the United States Congress, "Let's work together to solve the problem." And folks, we've got a problem when it comes to Social Security.

First, let me start by saying that Franklin Roosevelt did a good thing when he created the Social Security system. Social Security has been an important part of a lot of people's lives in America. The Social Security system created by Franklin Roosevelt provided a safety net for people in their retirement, and it worked. There are a lot of people still in this country counting on their Social Security check. And therefore, I want to start by saying to people who are getting their check, people who were born prior to 1950, the system will not change when it comes to you. The system has got plenty of money in it to make sure you get your check.

The reason I have to say that is because I understand how the Social Security issue has worked in the past: Somebody like me talks about it, and then somebody comes in behind by telling seniors, "Really what he's saying is he's going to take away your check." That's old-style, scare politics, but it is a part of the American system. And so people have got to understand when we start talking about Social Security, to strengthen the Social Security system for generations to come, to deal with the problem I'm about to describe to you, that if you're a senior in Greece, New York, you're going to get your check. It's the folks coming up that you need to worry about. See, if you're a grandmother, you're going to get your check. You need to worry about your grandson.

We're about to talk to a generation of folks from this part of the world about Social Security. Now, here's the reason I even have to bring it up, that the pay-as-you-go system in Social Security is confronting some serious demographic difficulties.

Now, the system is pay-as-you-go. That means when you pay in, we go ahead and pay out. Your payroll tax goes into a—not into trust that we hold for your account; your payroll tax goes into an account, and we pay out the money for the retirees, and with any

money left over, we spend it on general government. It's important for people to understand that aspect of Social Security. In other words, it's not a trust. In other words, we're not taking your money and holding it for you and then giving it back to you when you retire. We're taking your money; we're spending it on current retirees; and in that more money is coming in that needs to go out for the retirees, we're spending on other programs. And all that's left behind in Social Security is a group of file cabinets with IOUs in it. That's the way the system works. It's called pay-as-you-go.

Now, what's going to change from today in terms of the pay-as-you-go system is that there's a lot of people getting ready to retire. I happen to be one of them. *[Laughter]* At least I reach retirement age in 2008. As I like to remind people, that's a convenient date for me—*[laughter]*—particularly the end of 2008. And there are a lot of people like me. We're called the baby boomers. I'm looking at some baby boomers out there. As a matter of fact, by the time the baby boomers fully retire, there's going to be over 70 million of us getting paid by younger workers who are paying through payroll—paying our retirement through payroll taxes. Today, there's about 40 million retirees. So, you see, a lot more people are going to be—having to be taken care of in the retirement system through the pay-as-you-go system.

And not only that, we're going to live longer than the previous generation. And not only that, our benefits are going to rise faster—at least the promised benefits will rise faster than a previous generation. So you've got a lot of people who will be living longer, getting paid greater benefits, with fewer people paying into the system.

In 1950, there were some 16-to-1 workers paying into the system for each beneficiary. Today, there's 3.3 workers for every beneficiary. Soon there's going to be 2 workers for every beneficiary. So I think you're beginning to get a sense of the math. A lot of us are going to get greater benefits; we're going to live longer, with fewer of the young people paying in the system to take care of us.

Now, what ends up happening under that type of system is that, in 2017, the system starts to go into the red, more money going

out than coming in on Social Security benefits, for Social Security benefits relative to the payroll taxes. And it gets worse every year. In 2027, it's projected there will be \$200 billion in the hole, \$200 billion more benefits going out than payroll taxes coming in. Every year worse after that, until 2041, all those—the paper in those file cabinets in West Virginia are just eaten up, bankrupt. The system is bust.

What we're asking youngsters to do is to contribute money through payroll taxes into a system that will be broke in 2041, unless we do something about it. And so that's the problem. And it's a real problem. My friend Tim Penny, former Congressman from Minnesota, is going to describe the problem to you in further detail.

Now, I have a duty not only to describe the problem; I believe I have a duty to come forth and say, "Let's do something about it," and "Here's some ideas to the United States Congress." I did it. I stood up in front of the Congress at my State of the Union; I said, "Here's a problem. By the way, here's some ideas. All ideas are on the table except running up the payroll tax rate"—which I think would hurt the economy—"all ideas are on the table; bring them forward." And then I further refined that by talking about some of these ideas. And the reason I'm doing it is because I understand if we wait, it costs \$600 billion a year more every year we wait. See, if we don't do anything, if we don't come up with a solution to permanently solve this problem, it is conceivable a younger generation of Americans will have to pay an 18-percent payroll tax or benefits will have to be cut by 30 percent or the rest of Government will have to be cut substantially in order to make sure that the promises that have been made are promises that will be kept.

And so here are some ideas Congress needs to consider. First of all, that a future generation should receive benefits equal to or greater than the benefits enjoyed by today's seniors. That seems like a reasonable principle as we go forward. Secondly, that the Social Security system should be designed such—the future Social Security—by the way, if you were born prior to 1950, nothing changes. What I'm talking about here doesn't pertain to you. You're going to get

your check. The system is going to be exactly the way it is. There's plenty of money in it to take care of you. It's the younger folks that need to be paying attention to what I'm talking about.

And so I think a second principle ought to be this: if you've worked all your life, that you should not retire in poverty. That's a principle that makes sense. We can design a system that supports that concept. And here's the way you do it: It's called progressive indexing. That's a Washington kind of thing, you know. [Laughter] It says that if you're in the—for example, a guy named Pozen, who Tim knows well, came up with this concept. It said that if you're a—poorest 30 percent of the workers, nothing will change in terms of how your benefits increase.

Right now the benefits, by the way, increases are tied to wages. If you're the top 1 percent of workers in terms of income, your benefits would increase by the rate of inflation, not by the rate of wage. Your benefits increase but not as fast as the folks at the bottom end of the spectrum. And if you're in between, depending upon your income, your benefits will increase somewhere between the rate of wage and the rate of price.

Now, incredibly enough, structuring the system this way when it comes to benefit increases will get about—a significant portion of the problem permanently solved. I think it makes sense for Congress to consider this idea. It says you'll get a benefit equal to or greater than the previous generation, that at the very minimum, your benefit will grow at the rate of inflation; if you're poor, your benefit will grow at the rate of wage increases and that you won't retire into poverty.

And there are other things we can do to permanently solve the problem completely. I say permanently solve it because you might remember 1983. Were you in the Congress then, Tim? Yes, first term in the Congress. Tim came together with others—Ronald Reagan was the President; Tip O'Neill was the Speaker. We had a problem in Social Security. They came together and put together what they called a 75-year fix. Here we are 22 years later. The 75-year fix didn't stick for 75 years. It's time to fix this deal once and for all.

And there are some good ideas I put on the table. Let me tell you one other good idea that I want people to think about before we get to our panelists here, folks we're going to be discussing this issue with. And that is that I think that as we permanently solve the system, that we ought to make it a better deal for younger workers by allowing younger workers to take some of their own payroll taxes and set it aside in what is called a voluntary personal savings account.

Notice I said "voluntary." In other words, the Government should say to a younger worker, "If you want to, you can put some of your own money aside. You don't have to. If you're uncomfortable with watching your money grow with a conservative mix of bonds and stocks, you don't have to do that." You can keep it the way—into the system. And you'll get your check. If you're in the bottom 30 percent, your benefits over time will grow with wages. If you're in the top 1 percent, they'll grow with inflation. And if you're somewhere in between, they'll grow depending upon your income but greater than the rate of inflation. Secondly, it's called a personal account. That means you own it. It's an account the Government cannot take away.

So why would we do this? Why would we think of this idea? Well, first of all, with your money—your payroll taxes; after all it's your money—is earning about a 1.8 percent rate of return over time in the Social Security system. You can do better than that. You can do better than that with T-bills, which have very little risk to them, if any at all. You can do a lot better than that in a conservative mix of bonds and stocks. They say that over time you should be able to average at least 4.6 percent.

Now, over a lifetime, that is a significant amount of money relative to the 1.8 percent, because money compounds, money grows. For example, if you're making \$8 an hour and you put your money—and you're allowed to set aside a third of your payroll taxes—\$8 an hour over your life, and you're allowed to set a third of your payroll taxes aside in a personal savings account, and you earn the 4.5 percent rate of return, which is definitely achievable, particularly when you look at the history of a conservative mix of investments,

by the time it comes—you reach retirement age, you'll have earned \$100,000 in your nest egg. That will be a part of your Social Security retirement system. See, you'll get benefits out of the current system, out of the system that's reformed, plus you've got \$100,000 that you call your own.

If you're—say you're a police officer and a nurse, and they enter the workforce in 2011, and you set aside money; and you make the average salary those folks make over time, and you set aside a third of your payroll taxes—both of you do—by the time both retire, they have about \$669,000 in a personal savings account. Money grows over time. The higher the rate of return, the more—the faster your money grows and the more you end up with.

A lot of people are able to understand that. You know why? Because we're into a 401(k) culture. When Penny and I were growing up, we didn't have 401(k)s. The other day I was in an automobile manufacturing plant in Mississippi; I'm sitting with a lot of line workers. I said, "How many of you have got 401(k)s?" A lot of hands went up. A lot of people from different walks of life, different backgrounds, now understand what it means to watch your money grow. This isn't a new concept that's in American society. This is something that's taking place throughout all of society. And I think it makes sense to understand the investor class doesn't belong to a privileged few but the investor class ought to be extended to everybody who lives in America, if that's what you want, if that's what you choose.

I like the idea of somebody saying, "Here's your asset, and you can leave it to whomever you want." And the more people are able to do that in our society, the better off society is. See, I think Government ought to promote an ownership society. We ought to encourage more people to own their own home, encourage entrepreneurs to be able to take risk and own their own business and, in this case, encourage Americans from all walks of life, if they so choose, to manage their own retirement account. And I say "manage it." You know, it's your money. You're going to have some choices to make when it comes to a personal savings account. You can't take it to the lottery, by the way. You notice I've been stressing conservative mix of bonds and

stocks, because we want this account to grow and be a part of a modern safety net for you in your retirement. And so there will be some guidelines.

And I can predict to you that it works because a lot of other people have watched their money grow in the same kind of accounts, including people who work for the Federal Government. See, we have got in Washington what's called a Thrift Savings Plan. And Members of the United States Senate, for example, can choose, if they so desire, to set aside some of their own money in a personal savings account, a voluntary personal savings account. And a lot of people like it.

I think—I was doing one of these events with Senator McCain, who told me that his rate of return on his money was, like, 7 percent over the last 20 years. That's a lot better than the 1.8 percent we now get for you in the Social Security system. And so my attitude about this issue on Thrift Savings Plans when I speak to Members of the Congress is pretty simple. If the idea of taking some of your own money and setting it aside in a conservative mix of bonds and stocks is good enough for you, Mr. Senator, it is good enough for workers all across the United States of America. You'll be happy to hear Senator McCain agrees with me, because he's seen his money grow.

Now, a personal savings account would be a part of a Social Security retirement system. It would be a part of what you would have to retire when you reach retirement age. As you—as I mentioned to you earlier, we're going to redesign the current system. If you've retired, you don't have anything to worry about—third time I've said that. *[Laughter]* I'll probably say it three more times. See, in my line of work you got to keep repeating things over and over and over again for the truth to sink in, to kind of catapult the propaganda.

But if you choose to have one of these accounts—notice I keep saying "if you choose"; the Government is not going to tell you, "You have to do this." I think the Government ought to give you the opportunity to set up one of these accounts. And the account becomes a part of your retirement plan. It's your own asset. It's something you leave to

somebody—whomever you choose. And it makes the system eminently more fair.

Now, with those thoughts in mind, we got a problem, and here's some ideas on how to solve it. I've asked Congressman Tim Penny, right out of the State of Minnesota, a person who's followed this issue a lot. He happens to be of a different political party than I am, but, nevertheless, we both share the common goal of doing our duty as involved citizens to permanently solve the problem of Social Security today.

Welcome, Congressman. Thanks for coming.

[At this point, former Representative Timothy J. Penny, senior fellow and co-director, Hubert H. Humphrey Institute Policy Forum, made brief remarks.]

The President. Well, thank you, Tim. Good job. Articulate guy, isn't he? Yes. One thing you don't have to worry about is me staying with this effort. This is a vital issue. The American people expect those of us who are fortunate enough to serve in Washington to solve problems. And I've just begun. I like getting out of Washington, to begin with—[laughter]—I like explaining the situation. But we're just beginning. If this were easy, it would have been done a while ago. And I fully recognize some in Washington don't particularly want to address this issue. It may be too difficult. And I recognize some of them say, "Well, this is a partisan thing. We don't want to make one party look good as opposed—at the expense of another."

But let me tell you what I think is going to happen. I think—and Tim is right—I think more and more people recognize there's a problem, and people are beginning to say, "Go do something about it." And those who obstruct reform, no matter what party they're in, will pay a political price, in my judgment. People expect us to go to Washington, DC, to work together. That's what they want to see, particularly when it comes to an issue like Social Security.

We've got three members of a fine family here. We've got grandmother, mom, and down there anchoring at the end is grandson or son, isn't that right?

Audrey Ceglinski. That's right.

The President. Yes. You are Audrey Ceglinski.

Mrs. Ceglinski. That's right. I'm a 70-year-old widow.

The President. Don't ever say your age. [Laughter]

Mrs. Ceglinski. Oh, that's—I have no problem. Don't ask me my weight, though.

The President. Okay. [Laughter] Reminds me of my mother. [Laughter]

Mrs. Ceglinski. That's good. I was a teacher aide for Williamsville South High School for 25 years, and I retired from there—a very enjoyable job. I also wanted to mention I'm a volunteer for Meals on Wheels—

The President. Oh, fantastic.

Mrs. Ceglinski. —which I'm missing today. [Laughter]

The President. I hope somebody filled in.

Mrs. Ceglinski. Oh, yes. We've got some great people there. It's a good group.

The President. Thanks for doing that.

Mrs. Ceglinski. I like it a lot. My husband and I retired 8 years ago. Unfortunately, he passed on after only 2 years, so the money he had invested in Social Security in a sense was gone. Had we had a personal account, I would have had some money for Deb, Jeremy, his brothers, to pass on.

The President. Let me stop you there, if you don't mind.

Mrs. Ceglinski. That's fine. [Laughter] You have my permission.

The President. Here's the way the system works. Two folks work; they both contribute to the Social Security system; if one dies early, the spouse, the remaining spouse gets to choose her benefits or his benefits, which are ever greater, but not both. Think about that system. Dad went and contributed a lot into the system. He passed away. But the money he put in—most of the money he put in is gone. That's not fair. What kind of system is that? It's not a fair system. It's not fair to the family. It's not fair to the person who has worked all his life, in this case. Had he been able to put money aside in a personal account, that account would have gone to Audrey.

Isn't that right? Keep going. You're on a roll.

Mrs. Ceglinski. Okay. [Laughter] I have five children, seven grandchildren, and that's my concern. I think you making the young people aware that there's a problem is going to make them aware and encourage them to save. And I think that's what we need to do.

The President. Well, I appreciate that. Younger people need to pay attention to this issue. See, if nothing gets done in Congress, as Congressman Penny pointed out, you're going to get to pay higher payroll taxes—and higher and higher and higher payroll taxes. And so you need to pay attention. Actually, I believe younger people are beginning to pay closer attention to this issue. We're beginning to get their attention.

First thing is, is there any doubt in your mind that you're going to get your check?

Mrs. Ceglinski. I'm getting my check, and it's wonderful.

The President. They're still coming.

Mrs. Ceglinski. It's still coming, and I'm planning on it for a while yet. [Laughter]

The President. Well, you need to, yes. Heading toward 80.

Mrs. Ceglinski. That's right.

The President. Right around the corner. You look great.

Mrs. Ceglinski. Thank you very much.

The President. You look like 100 to me. That's where you're going to be. Thirty more years?

Mrs. Ceglinski. I'll remind you of that. [Laughter]

The President. All right, good. And she's going to want her check. On her 99th birthday, she's going to want her check. And you're going to get your check.

Okay, and so who did you bring with you?

Mrs. Ceglinski. I brought my daughter, Deborah, the oldest of my five.

The President. Debbie or Deborah?

Mrs. Ceglinski. Debbie. We like to call her Debbie.

The President. You called her Deborah.

Mrs. Ceglinski. Yes.

The President. Okay. [Laughter]

Mrs. Ceglinski. Only when she's in trouble. And Jeremy, her youngest son.

The President. Fantastic. Debbie, welcome.

Deborah Brown. Thank you.

The President. Thanks for coming. Mom did a good job, didn't she?

Mrs. Brown. Yes, she did.

The President. So what was it like growing up? Was Mom pretty tough, a disciplinarian?

Mrs. Brown. Yes, she was. [Laughter]

The President. Well, then you and I share the same thing. [Laughter]

Mrs. Brown. Yes, we do.

The President. Tell me what's on your mind.

Mrs. Brown. Well, I appreciate the opportunity to be here. I was an at-home mom. I was privileged that my husband, who is here today, was willing to let me stay home and raise the kids, work part-time. But when you do that, you don't get to pay into a retirement system anywhere. So I went, got my master's degree. I have a job I'm very happy with now. But I will never be able to build a good retirement in the amount of time I have until I retire. So it's very appealing, the plans that you're talking about, because I'll be quite dependent on Social Security.

The President. Yes, set aside a little money, watch it grow at a better rate than the current Social Security system.

Mrs. Brown. Exactly, so that—certainly, for Jeremy and for my other three sons, as you said, it would make me happy to know that they're taken care of, too, and that they would have options.

The President. Right. And how is old Jeremy doing?

Jeremy Brown. I'm doing good. [Laughter]

The President. Tell them where you were born.

Mr. Brown. Tomball, Texas. [Laughter]

The President. Tomball, Texas, right outside of Houston.

Mr. Brown. Yes.

The President. So you've got Grandmom here; you've got Mom here.

Mr. Brown. I've got the brother out in the audience—one of the three is out in the audience, the other grandparents.

The President. Good. First of all, what are you doing with yourself these days?

Mr. Brown. Well, I'm 18. I'm a sophomore at Canisius College in Buffalo.

The President. What's your major?

Mr. Brown. I'm dual-majoring in business marketing and business management.

The President. Great. All A's?

Mr. Brown. Hopefully. [Laughter]

The President. Well, don't worry about it. That won't disqualify you from being President.

All right, Jeremy, get going, will you?

Mr. Brown. All right, well, being the younger generation, I'm just starting to pay into the system. I like the idea of having these personal accounts, getting a better rate of return in the end, and compound interest and everything so I build up something for myself that I could leave for my future kids and everything. And I like the fact that I'll have something to show for it, because people go and pay decades and decades into Social Security and when it comes time for me to retire, if we don't change, I'll have nothing to show for it.

The President. You know what's interesting—I say this a lot when I travel around the country—is that a lot of young people think it's more likely they'll see a UFO than a Social Security check. [Laughter] What do you think, Jeremy?

Mr. Brown. I don't know. I'd rather see Social Security change. [Laughter]

The President. I didn't ask your preference. [Laughter] But there's a lot of young people who, when they listen to the debate and understand the demographic shift that's going on, don't think they're going to see anything. What kind of system is that where you got a young guy getting ready to graduate from college paying into a—paying a payroll tax, a hefty payroll tax, into a system where he doesn't think he's going to see any benefits from it. It's a system that sounds like to me is screaming for reform, so that somebody who contributes into the system not only knows they're taking care of a baby boomer generation or doing their part for their retirement but also will have something left over for his family, in this case.

What do you want to do when you get out of college?

Mr. Brown. Go into real estate.

The President. Real estate, yes, good. Sounds like to me you can understand finances pretty well, too, that money can grow over time.

Mr. Brown. Yes.

The President. Anybody—any other 18-year-olds that you know worried about this issue, thinking about the issue?

Mr. Brown. They are now. I got them informed.

The President. Yes, you do? That's good. [Laughter] Good job. It's important for people Jeremy's age to start listening to this discussion. As Tim said, the longer we wait, the more difficult it's going to be for an up-and-coming generation.

This is a generational issue, folks. See, the grandmothers and granddads around America now understand they're going to get their check, and so once that comfort level has been provided, the next logical question from many of the grandmothers I've talked to is, "What are you going to do about my grandson? You've said there's a problem, Mr. President, I expect you and the United States Congress to make sure that my grandson has got a viable retirement system." That's what a lot of people are beginning to say around America.

And that's why I can predict that once we get through on this issue, once I finish traveling the country—and I got a lot more to do—people are going to start demanding from their Representatives and their Senators a solution. They don't want any Washington doubletalk. What they want is a solution, so a grandmother can then look at her son, her grandson, Jeremy, and say, "Thankfully, people in Washington did their duty, and I can rest easy knowing I'm going to get my check and Jeremy is going to get his as well." That's the issue.

Good job. You were great.

You two look alike. These are the Weitzel girls, McKenna and Riley, isn't that right? Okay. Which one is Riley? That makes you McKenna.

McKenna Weitzel. That's true. [Laughter]

The President. They're twins. I'm the father of twins. I am a white-haired father of twins. [Laughter]

Riley Weitzel. They can do that to you.

The President. Did you do the same thing?

Ms. Riley Weitzel. Yes.

The President. Tell me what you all do.

Ms. Riley Weitzel. Well, I'm a history teacher at Bread of Life Christian Academy here in Rochester.

The President. Fabulous. Thanks for teaching.

Ms. Riley Weitzel. Yes. I teach history to the fourth through seventh graders there. Hi, guys. I love you, and I miss you, and I'll be there tomorrow. Be good.

The President. Taking advantage of C-SPAN. [Laughter]

Ms. Riley Weitzel. And I am getting married in the summer, in August. And my fiancé and I are just starting to think about retirement and about future generations and, hopefully, if God blesses us with kids, our kids, and something we can pass on down to them. We're really excited about your plan and that we can set up personal accounts and then watch compound interest grow and hopefully get a nest egg and be able to hand that down to our kids.

The President. Fantastic. I don't remember thinking about compound interest growing when I was 23. There wasn't a lot of discussion about that type of issue. There's a change; there's a cultural change in America when it comes to investment, because a lot of people are now getting used to the concept of watching their own money grow, isn't that right?

So is fiancé here?

Ms. Riley Weitzel. Yes, he's right over there, Ben.

The President. Ben. Look at him, fine-looking lad.

Ms. Riley Weitzel. Thanks. I think so, too.

The President. August is the wedding?

Ms. Riley Weitzel. August 6th. You're invited. [Laughter]

The President. That's a smart move. [Laughter] She knows I won't come, but I will send a gift. [Laughter] McKenna going to be in the wedding?

Ms. Riley Weitzel. McKenna is my maid of honor, of course.

The President. Cool. McKenna, what do you do?

Ms. McKenna Weitzel. I'm a hairdresser at the Scott Miller Salon in Pittsford, New York.

The President. Great, good.

Ms. McKenna Weitzel. Yes, it's a wonderful place to work.

The President. A lot of talk about Social Security?

Ms. McKenna Weitzel. Not a whole lot there but honestly, I've been thinking about it.

The President. Have you? Good.

Ms. McKenna Weitzel. Yes, definitely. I feel like there's definitely a problem in the system right now, and things need to change. And I want to say that it's completely commendable of you to stand up and tackle this issue.

The President. Oh, thanks. Thank you. That's my job. [Laughter] I appreciate you saying that. There's a lot of others in Washington feel the same way I feel, that there's—they say, "Are you taking a risk?" How can you be taking a risk when you're doing what the people expect, solving problems. I think the people who take the risk are those who won't come to the table to discuss the issue in a way that will help solve the problem.

So are you in agreement with Riley on personal accounts?

Ms. McKenna Weitzel. I certainly do. I feel like being able to take more ownership over your future and over your investments is very wise.

The President. Yes. Don't you like the idea—some of you have got 401(k)s, and you open up your statement on a quarterly basis. It seems like to me that would be a healthy thing for our country if more and more people are opening up a statement that says, "This is what you're worth. This is how your worth has grown." It's a—to me, it's a notion of getting people to understand that they've got to pay attention to the future of the country, when you, on a monthly basis, in some cases on a daily basis if you want to get on the Internet and look at your asset base. Now, you're contributing in to the—both of you—payroll tax, aren't you?

Ms. McKenna Weitzel. Yes, we both currently are.

The President. Pretty good-size chunk?

Ms. Riley Weitzel. No, not really.

The President. No, a pretty good-size chunk of your payroll tax.

Ms. Riley Weitzel. Oh, of course.

Ms. McKenna Weitzel. Yes, yes.

The President. I think the interesting thing is that when you first talk to people entering into the workplace, their reaction when they first get their checks, what—their reaction to what it's like to not have quite as much money as you expected. That happen to you?

Ms. McKenna Weitzel. Yes, that was a shocker. [*Laughter*]

The President. Yes, in other words, Government tends to take out a pretty good chunk. And it seems like to me that a significant chunk that is being taken out ought to at least be able to say to young kids, “There’s a reason why. It’s worthwhile for the money to go out, because it will help me in my retirement age.” That’s kind of what we’re talking about, isn’t it?

Okay, now that you’ve got your kids watching, anything else you want to say?

Ms. Riley Weitzel. Just, be good today. That’s all.

The President. How about you, McKenna? McKenna, you got anything else you need to say?

Ms. McKenna Weitzel. Well, I just also want to state that I feel like it’s just encouraging to know that we could collect money in the end, that we aren’t hoping that there will be money there, that it truly will be, and also just the responsibility of knowing that you’re setting aside money and that you will be getting it.

The President. See, it’s a little lack of trust right now, it sounds like to me, “Don’t quite trust the Government to have a Social Security system available for my—for the money I put in.” This is a matter of trust. This is a big issue.

I want to thank our panelists for coming to discuss this issue. Very good job.

Washington has a duty to earn the trust of the people by making wise decisions about how the people’s money will be used. We have a chance—both Republicans and Democrats have a chance to come together and to solve the Social Security issue forever. And when we do—and I believe we will, because the people’s voices are going to resonate on this issue—and when we do, all of us who are fortunate enough to serve this country can look back and say, “We did our duty for generations to come.”

Listen, thank you all for coming. May God bless you all, and may God continue to bless our country.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:48 a.m. in the Athena Performing Arts Center at Greece Athena Middle and High School. In his remarks, he referred to Robert C. Pozen, former member, President’s Commission to Strengthen Social Security.

Remarks on Bioethics

May 24, 2005

Thank you all. Please be seated. Good afternoon, and welcome to the White House.

I have just met with 21 remarkable families. Each of them has answered the call to ensure that our society’s most vulnerable members are protected and defended at every stage of life.

The families here today have either adopted or given up for adoption frozen embryos that remained after fertility treatments. Rather than discard these embryos created during in vitro fertilization or turn them over for research that destroys them, these families have chosen a life-affirming alternative. Twenty-one children here today found a chance for life with loving parents.

I believe America must pursue the tremendous possibilities of science, and I believe we can do so while still fostering and encouraging respect for human life in all its stages. In the complex debate over embryonic stem cell research, we must remember that real human lives are involved—both the lives of those with diseases that might find cures from this research and the lives of the embryos that will be destroyed in the process. The children here today are reminders that every human life is a precious gift of matchless value.

I appreciate Mike Leavitt, Department of Health and Human Services, for being here. He’s the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. I picked a really good man to take on this assignment. He’s doing a fine job.

I want to thank the executive director of Nightlight Christian Adoptions, Ron Stoddart, for joining us today. Welcome. I want to thank Lori Maze, the director of